Carefree Discipleship
March 8, 1970
Matthew 6:19-34
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Snoopy is in trouble. The long suffering dog in Charles Schultz's cartoon strip "Peanuts" is currently in a whole lot of trouble, primarily because he is a "worrier". For several weeks Snoopy was on a single minded pursuit of the job of Head Beagle, the very pinnacle of success, prestige and power. It was a burning desire and there was no doubt at all where Snoopy's heart was. But having achieved his goal, having been appointed Head Beagle Snoopy has discovered that it isn't all it was cracked up to be. Life has been torturous recently: Snoopy is discovering that "Life is more than success, prestige and power". Charles Schultz would not appreciate my writing his cartoon for him, but I know that something will happen soon. The anxiety is almost at the breaking point. Snoopy will be relieved of his duties and returned to the glorious freedom of his carefree existence. In the next week or so Snoopy will testify to the truth of that ancient wisdom in the sixth chapter of Matthew: "...do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day."

Man is a "worrier". One of the ways to define the determining difference between men and animals is that men worry. And men worry a lot because they, unlike animals, are aware of tomorrow. Anthropologists have yet to discover a consciousness of time, a sense of time moving, in any life except human. And while our consciousness of time motivates us to plan and prepare, it is, at the same time, the root of our basic worry. We are always balancing the present moment with the future, and therefore not fully living or enjoying the present moment. In life style we are very much like the child who worries about having too much fun today because there may be none left for tomorrow.

There are many avenues of approach to the problem of human anxiety. There are literally hundreds of scholarly tomes devoted to the topic. Any scholar worth his intellectual salt has identified this as "the age of anxiety", and anxiety as the major problem political, economic or social to be confronted. And so we

must choose our approach and I would suggest to you the whole matter of time. Our anxiety is the result of our awareness of time.

In the middle of a particularly rewarding experience you and I are inclined to feel anxious - because we are aware that it will be over soon. This has happened to me for as long as I can remember. During a week at the sea shore, I begin to have negative feelings along about Wednesday or Thursday, because I realize that for this great experience, time is running out. In my reading recently I encountered a charming illustration by Ernest Campbell, pastor of Riverside Church in New York. Doctor Campbell recalls saving up for weeks to be able to afford the luxury of a grand stand seat at a major league double header. But once the first game got under way he began to measure the rate at which his happiness was ebbing. At the end of the first inning 1/18th of the pleasure was gone. [Plain Words for Troubled Times - The Protestant Hour p. 55] That struck me because I've done exactly that: a long awaited train ride to Pittsburg with my father, reserved seats for the Pirates and the Brooklyn Dodgers, the terrors of the National League. And at the ripe old age of eight I fretted during the experience about the fact that it was slipping away. How I wished time would stand still! But of course it didn't.

We all have had that experience. And in a very real sense we live like that. We are painfully aware of time - and that becomes a terribly destructive anxiety. Now let's push deeper.

Time awareness, even in its most embryonic form, is really death awareness. An animal does not realize its mortality. Everyday is forever. But you and I do. We are aware of death, of our own death, because we understand the relentless movement of time. Paul Tillich, perhaps the greatest philosophic theologian of our generation, wrote a lot about anxiety and suggested that the source of all human anxiety was a dread of non-being. We are able to contemplate the fact that one day we will be no more, and that knowledge remains with us intellectually and emotionally like a strong, deep-sea current, We don't articulate often: most of us aren't able to put it together as Professor Tillich did: all of us would

rather not articulate it. But it is there and it plays a major role in the way we behave, and it pops up suddenly, ocassionally, usually without warning, when we discover a new wrinkle or gray hair. Time is moving: we are aging: ocassionally that truth confronts us and immediately we push it back down into that current beneath the surface. But it is still there.

Madison Avenue knows it's there. Madison Avenue knows the power it has to motivate us and therefore exploits it every way imaginable. Advertising, along with being totally without taste, seems bent on persuading us that we are not aging; that time, for us, can be pushed to a stand still. How many older people make it in the television commercials? Even the woman with slipping dentifrices is well under thirty and exuding a robust youth. Madison Avenue knows an important secret about us - we will buy anything so long as we can use the product to deny the fact that we are aging. And so youth sets our styles: from the drink for those "who think young" to the whole medicine cabinet full of creams and greases and sprays the sole intent of which is to deny the fact that we aren't what we used to be, and tomorrow we won't be what we are today. We can be, and are, exploited at this most vulnerable point. We can be persuaded to participate in the big lie. We can be moved to spend immense amounts of money in order to stop the clock.

Our anxiety comes from our awareness of time, and that in turn, is merely an awareness of our own death. Now let us add a little more Tillich. Professor Tillich taught that anxiety is the dread of non-being. But he also taught that a man can die in a lot of ways other than physically: that non-being has many forms and that we are conscious of them while we are quite alive. Death is the ultimate blow to our ego:. it says "we really aren't worth very much". And therefore a lot of things in life which say the same phrase are related to this elemental dread. We dread being a non-person, dead or alive. And again Madison Avenue knows a secret about us and offers a therapeutic prescription. "Buy and save. Accumulate! It doesn't matter what. Just accumulate." Erich Fromm has written: "Throughout the whole process of education, in the family and from

Kindergarten through college, the individual is made to feel that the meaning of his life is bound up with something that can be destroyed by a change of fashion or a bit of bad luck." And so we are set on a frantic course of buying in order to be secure and safe; of saving money, things, experiences in order to shout to the world that we count for something, we matter, we have meaning, we are! But it really doesn't work. Snoopy discovered that when he became Head Beagle and was as worried as ever. And we discover that too, when in the middle of our pile of gadgets and cosmetics, bank accounts and retirement plans, a moment of truth breaks in.

Carl Sandburg writes that Abraham Lincoln was very fond of these lines from an anonymous poem:

> "For we are the same that our fathers have been ;
> We see the same sights that our fathers have seen;
> we drink the same stream, we feel the same sun,
> and run the same course that our fathers have run.
> The thoughts we are thinking, our fathers would think:
> From the death we are shirking , our fathers would shirk
> To the life we are clinging, they would also cling -
> But it speeds from us all like a bird on the wing."
> [Carl Sandburg, Abraham Lincoln, The Prairie Years 1,
> Scribner, 1926, p. 309]

"To the life we are clinging, they would also cling - But it speeds from us all like a bird on the wing." The fact that those lines were loved by a great American, a great thinker, more than one hundred years ago ought to teach us that while our anxieties may be intensified by the bomb and environmental pollution and social change, they are not particularly new. In fact, man hasn't changed much at all. 2,000 years ago Jesus addressed the problem of anxiety in a very blunt, straight forward manner. There is a lengthy dessertation in the Sermon on the Mount which ~~I have read to you this morning.~~ includes these words - -

"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth .... do not be anxious about

about your life ..... Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life...? Seek, first God's Kingdom."

What do we make of that? It's either terribly true or terribly foolish, and it doesn't seem to leave any room for compromise.

One thing it doesn't say is that the Christian ought to be frivolous and irresponsible. Jesus own experience rules that out completely. As a carpenter, supporting a family, he knew the necessity of work and planning and saving. It doesn't say that things are bad, or that money is evil, or that the true Christian ought to depend on the benevolence of others for subsistance. Jesus never taught that the providence of God is like a daily basket from heaven. Look at the birds - a lot starve and freeze everyday. Look at the lilies - they dry up if they don't get moisture.

What it does say is that life is far more than an exercise in accumulation; that the ~~new quality of~~ life ~~in Christ is~~ may be characterized by a glorious freedom from the nagging, pulling of that subteranean current; that today may be lived and enjoyed for its own sake, that today's goods and money and things are to be used, not accumulated because our future is secure. It says that this obessive fear of non-being - this most basic anxiety that stalks us every day of our lives - no longer has power. We are free from it - we are safe.

That is a very important word for us. Our anxiety may not differ fundamentally from anyone else's in history. But we do know that it comes in a new wrapper today: it is more intense. We do live on the brink of destruction: we are asking seriously whether our grandchildren will have the privilege of dying in old age: we do live in a hurried, commercialized, high powered social system that strips us of individuality and therefore meaning: we do live in the midst of cataclysmic social upheaval when nothing stays the same very long. And so our anxiety is intensified and magnified. And more and more we are tempted to express that anxiety in one of two ways - either by "coping out" and giving up because it's too late;

or by buying and accumulating and obsessively worrying about tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.] insert #1

To us - now - in this time and place - the Gospel of Jesus Christ speaks a firm, and comforting but demanding word. We are free and safe - free from the anxiety about time - safe from the threat of non-being or death. Free to live our lives, this moment, this glorious day - for its own sake and none other. We are free in Jesus Christ to enjoy being human and alive in 1970; free to enjoy the fruits of our affluence; free to live creatively and joyfully because we are safe.

Wouldn't you give anything to be that free? Is't there something deep within each one of us that longs to be that kind of men and women? Well, it's right there in front of us - for the taking. But we can't have it both ways. We can't compromise at this point. We can't serve two masters. We can't keep responding to our anxiety and then once a week turn to God and expect a miracle. We can't devote all our energy to making time stand still, or to accumulating symbols of our own invulnerability and expect a one hour worship experience to transform us into carefree disciples.

That happens only where we put things in perspective. When we accept the Lordship of Jesus Christ - when he becomes truly master - of our lives, of our motives, of our possessions. That happens in the moment of commitment, when we seek first his Kingdom.

Amen.

These are trying days, our father, and we are very much inclined to be anxious about a lot of things. Give us the faith to throw ourselves open to you; to walk confidently into our future because we are safe. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.